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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000844

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: A NOT-SO-HOT SPRING? WHAT IF WE'RE WRONG...

REF: YEREVAN 809

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway for reasons 1.5(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) We continue to believe that the current round of opposition protests across Armenia is unlikely to develop into a revolution, rose, velvet or otherwise (reftel). The Ambassador has urged restraint in the strongest possible terms during meetings this week with both senior government officials and key opposition leaders, and we remain convinced that the leadership on both sides wants to avoid violence. As both the opposition and government raise the rhetorical stakes, however, and skirmishes around the opposition rallies make headlines, we want to explore potential alternative Armenian scenarios: what happens if we're wrong? End Summary.

AMBASSADOR URGES RESTRAINT

2. (C) The Ambassador has strongly urged restraint during meetings this week with the most prominent opposition leaders, Stepan Demirchian and Artashes Geghamian, as well as with Foreign Minister Oskanian. The Ambassador warned Oskanian that the government had a special responsibility to avoid violent outbreaks at the upcoming demonstrations, and noted our concern that the police stood by and did not intervene during the incident March 5 when members of private security forces (as identified by Oskanian) destroyed journalists' cameras and equipment. The Ambassador noted that if there were significant violence at upcoming rallies the government would be held accountable in international public opinion, and that any serious disturbances would harm Armenia's economy.

VIOLENCE COULD UP THE ANTE CONSIDERABLY...

3. (SBU) The authorities have been concentrating their efforts on reducing the number of possible demonstrators. They are reportedly using the police in provincial towns and villages to pressure people to stay out of Yerevan on April 9, and will undoubtedly undertake measures to impede traffic into the city that day. These actions, along with arrests of opposition activists, opening a criminal investigation of the opposition Justice Alliance, and calling in selected opposition MPs for questioning by the procuracy, are increasing an already tense situation. Some prominent opposition leaders (but not Geghamian or Demirchian) are much more inclined to confrontation, even violent confrontation. Both senior government and opposition leaders continue to emphasize their commitment to keeping the situation peaceful. During similar election-related demonstrations in 2003, both sides acted with considerable restraint. That outcome seems somewhat less likely this time as the mood has turned harsher across the board. If security officials on the street become involved in further violent altercations and if anyone were seriously injured or killed we expect that public emotions could well lead to large-scale demonstrations (with 50,000 or more people on the streets) which would open the door to even more opportunities for violence.

4. (C) There is at least one intriguing sign that even senior government officials are concerned about the outcome. One source in a sensitive position claimed that President Kocharian and Defense Minister Sargsian have hedged their bets and sent their families to Moscow, while Prime Minister Margarian has sent his family to France. (However, at a dinner on April 4 the Ambassador spent several hours with Mrs. Bella Kocharian. In the course of an extended conversation, she showed no concern about the current political situation, although she did mention that she had just returned from several days in Moscow.)

...BUT THEN WHAT?

15. (C) Even if we assume that sufficiently large, widespread, prolonged demonstrations would lead Kocharian to resign we are still faced with the question of what would happen then. Constitutionally the next person in line is the Speaker of the National Assembly Artur Baghdasarian. While he is not a Kocharian "crony" he is certainly not part of the opposition, and would not be likely to make things easy for the opposition. There is no clear opposition figure who could replace Kocharian, and there is little that various factions in the opposition agree on except for their desire to remove Kocharian.

BAGHDASARIAN A POSSIBLE WINNER

16. (C) Baghdasarian has been developing a stronger public profile over the past ten months, and his recent statements urging government restraint and calling on the government to stop using detentions to intimidate opposition politicians are notable in their moderation. It is not inconceivable that, were Kocharian to resign, a disgruntled Armenian electorate would turn to him rather than to any of the opposition politicians. As part of the current governing coalition, he might also be acceptable to current members of the Kocharian government.

"PEACEMAKER" ROLE COULD WIN BIG FOR DASHNAKS

17. (C) The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF - "Dashnaksutyun") Party attempted to fill the widening political divide in late March by offering a "consultative role" for the opposition. Prominent ARF Party leader and National Assembly Deputy Speaker Vahan Hovanesian even went so far as to urge the governing coalition to find better ways to consider opposition policy concerns. The role of potential peacemaker is relatively new for the ARF, whose polarizing rhetoric (on topics such as Turkey and N-K) is periodically the source of contention among the governing coalition or a target for opposition criticism. Even though the opposition categorically rejected the offer, the ARF's political olive branch was the only such offer and gives the party a serious, policy-focused appearance in the midst of emotional political rhetoric. If Kocharian were to resign, the ARF would likely maintain its seat at the table given the constructive face it has put forward thus far this Spring.

FINAL COMMENT

18. (C) As we noted initially, we still believe that the current round of protests will lose steam after several demonstrations. The potential for violence exists, however, and if peaceful protesters were to be killed or seriously injured we would expect to see a significant backlash that could well provide momentum for much larger rallies with greater risks of violence. The opposition simply does not have the resources to force Kocharian out of office if he doesn't choose to resign -- and we see no sign that he is about to leave office voluntarily.

ORDWAY